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Qaddafi Plans 'Water War' With Egypt

No one in the American Southwest needs to be told that access to such water sources as the Colorado River can spell the difference between lush farmland and desert. Powerful interests have battled for decades over the right to share the limited water supplies that can turn a desert green.

Half a world away, Libyan dictator Col. Muammar Qaddafi is planning a "water war" of his own. His long-range objective, intelligence sources suspect, is to bring Egypt to its knees by cutting off the waters of the Nile, which have sustained Egypt for millenniums.

Ostensibly, Qaddafi's grandiose scheme to run a pipeline 1,200 miles from an underground lake in southern Libya to the Mediterranean coast is an ambitious plan to make the desert bloom where the bulk of Libya's population lives. The project, which could cost as much as \$25 billion, would irrigate 450,000 acres. Qaddafi has dubbed his project "The Great Manmade River."

The economic goal of the pipeline is arguably benign, if a bit harebrained, considering that its cost is more than double Libya's annual income from oil. But it's the suspected political goal that has Western intelligence sources concerned.

Both Egypt and Sudan fear that if Libya succeeds in draining the underground lake in the Kufra Oasis, their own aquifers also will be drained, perhaps lowering the level of the Nile far to the east and Lake Chad even farther to the southwest.

The Egyptians fear that Qaddafi wouldn't stop at just poaching underground water supplies, but has a secret plan to extend his pipeline from Kufra south

and then east to the Nile in northern Sudan. The distance would be about the same as the publicly announced pipeline from Kufra to the Mediterranean. The Egyptians note that Qaddafi is already building a 160-mile road from Kufra to the Sudanese border, and the Nile is only 325 miles away across the desert.

Alarming evidence that Qaddafi is plotting a water war was uncovered by Egyptian intelligence early last year. It was a plan, confirmed a year later by a defecting Libyan pilot, to bomb the Aswan High Dam in southern Egypt, draining the huge water reserves in Lake Nasser and robbing Cairo 700 miles north of water and electricity.

Qaddafi himself was surprisingly candid about his ambitions in an interview last August with a Cairo newspaper.

"I imagine that it is possible," he said, "to link the Nile to the Great Manmade River in Libya, that the Libyan and Egyptian deserts can turn green, and that the Western Desert can yield fruits and become a green carpet . . . I would imagine that Lake Nasser will be linked to al-Kufra, the source of the Great Manmade River. Will we not thus create paradise on earth?"

A less beatific view of Qaddafi's intentions was expressed last year by then-President Gaafar Nimeiri of Sudan, who was ousted in a coup April 6. He told reporters that Qaddafi was already waging a water war, "causing starvation through controlling the River Nile water." He pointed out that "this war has grave consequences for Sudan, but it is a matter of life and death for Egypt, which is wholly dependent on the Nile water."